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\$2.19-Million Settlement in Fatal Blaze

By KIM MURPHY,
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The survivors of a tragic 1982 hotel fire that killed 24 residents and led to sweeping changes in Los Angeles fire codes have reached a \$2.19-million settlement with the owners of the Dorothy Mae Hotel, attorneys disclosed Monday.

The settlement, which concludes four years of litigation over a fire that was one of the deadliest in the city's history, will be apportioned among the nearly 150 people who were injured and family members of the 24 people who died.

Although the fire turned out to have been deliberately set by a nephew of the hotel manager, a relative of many of the victims, the lawsuit nonetheless alleged numerous safety violations on the part of the owners of the 55-year-old building, located on Sunset Boulevard on the fringe of downtown.

Most of the nearly 200 residents who lived in the 43-unit apartment-hotel were related, and many had come to the United States from the same small village in Mexico. Many of the victims died in the predawn blaze while trying to escape through fiery corridors.

Deliberately Set

While there was no question that the fire was deliberately set by Humberto de la Torre, 21, who last year pleaded guilty to 25 counts of first-degree murder, the crux of the lawsuit was that the victims could have survived the blaze had necessary safety measures been taken, said Torrance attorney Lawrence R. Booth, who represented the plaintiffs. The 25th murder count was for the unborn child of one of the victims.

During the course of the lawsuit, Booth gathered evidence that fire doors in the hallways, which would have kept the fire from spreading up the stairwells to additional floors, were routinely kept open for additional ventilation. City fire inspectors had cited the building owners several times over the fire doors, but the problem remained, Booth said.

'Result of Arson'

"Some people may feel that it's inappropriate for the building owners to be liable when the fire was a result of arson, particularly when the arsonist was a relative of the people who were injured," Booth said.

"But the theory of the law is that buildings ought to be as safe as possible from fire, irrespective of what causes the fire, and we believe that if the building had been appropriately safeguarded, it would have been a very small fire, the Fire Department would have put it out and there would have been little, if any, injury or loss of life," he said.

A little more than a year and a half after the fire—and as a direct result—the Los Angeles City Council adopted a tough new safety ordinance that requires such things as automatic sprinklers, fire doors activated by smoke detectors and self-closing devices on guest room doors that open into interior corridors.

The owners of the hotel, a partnership including Los Angeles attorney Hiram Kwan, could not be reached for comment Monday.

But attorneys for the insurance carriers who agreed to the settlement, David Bailey and William Huss, said in a prepared statement:

"This arson fire was caused by a convicted arsonist and has been a tragedy for all involved, tenants and owners alike. This settlement will put the matter to rest and let everyone get on with their lives."